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Against 'the other'? Expanding or reducing 'the other' in populist mobilisation: the case of refugees

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Theme

Taking 2015 as a critical juncture, this paper analyses the different trajectories of the politicisation of refugees in the EU.

Summary

'Against the other' belongs to the core of populist rhetoric. Not surprisingly, the depiction of migrants as 'the other' and the rejection of migration in European societies has been one of the common positions of (authoritarian/radical right) populist parties in Europe since their rise. From the 2008 financial crisis to the 2015 refugee crisis and the more recent Brexit, new political issues were channelled not only by mainstream parties but also by new challenger parties. This paper builds on approaches of issue politicisation to explain variation in the degree and main characteristics of political processes. We distinguish between potential for mobilisation (objective factors) and party success to dig into political behaviour and its impact (Messina 2007). In short, we seek to uncover the trajectories of politicisation (or not) of issues related to the primary concern of populists, namely, solidarity against the other. The cases of Germany, Denmark and Spain are examined to dig into the configuration of the conflict and the differences in its structuring power.

Analysis

Politicised solidarity

The classical political science understanding of politicisation refers to the process of turning something political: 'Politicisation, in general terms, means the demand for, or the act of, transporting an issue or an institution into the field or sphere of politics –making previously unpolitical matters political' (Zürn, 2018, p. 977-978). Politicisation is the triggering off moment of any politics, when political power enters the game (Kauppi & Trenz, 2020). This is different from political conflicts or contentious politics that are already a structuring element of politics. Politicisation takes place at a critical juncture, when established patterns of contestation between political parties and other collective

actors are transformed in often radical and unexpected ways. As such, politicisation can result in the restructuring of the political party landscape and the establishment of new cleavages.

According to this understanding of politicisation as a rupture in the routine way of doing politics, we find that moments of politicisation are often confined to singular periods or events, like for instance election campaigns (De Wilde & Trenz, 2012). Such periods of heightened attention and mobilisation remain exceptional and distinct from 'regular politics'. Political institutions, governments and parties can at one point decide to politicise certain issues and at other point develop strategies of de-politicisation. It is also possible that strategies to politicise an issue (like refugees) are responded by the strategies of others to depoliticise the same issue.

European societies have experienced increasing political turmoil with the presence of populist radical parties or authoritarian populist parties. All share a common rhetoric against migrants, and increasingly the opposition to European integration too (De Vries & Edwards, 2009). When authoritarian values and populist rhetoric are translated into public policies, the key issue is 'to defend us through restrictions on the other, justifying restrictions on the entry of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and foreigners' (Inglehart & Norris, 2019, p. 8).

This paper comparatively analyses the following: (a) if mainstream or populist parties take up on the issue of inter/trans/national solidarity during the past decade in the three selected cases; (b) how parties frame the issue of refugees with welfare and security arguments –ideational/ideological elements and narratives of otherness–; and (c) the trajectory of issue politicisation since 2015. The country comparison examines three cases that offer different trajectories of politicisation. It aims to identify the starting point of politicisation in each case and the following sequence. In particular, it discerns whether governments and parties can decide to politicise certain issues or develop strategies of de-politicisation. Finally, it assesses the salience of the refugee issue across national contexts.

Germany: consensual solidarity from the top?

What is the most important driving force behind the politicisation of solidarity issues? As a leading destination country for asylum seekers, (pre)conditions for mobilisation already existed in Germany in 2015: the flow of refugees fleeing into the country had been increasing steadily since the beginning of the decade. In 2015 alone, Germany received around 1 million asylum seekers and over 440.000 formal applications, a tipping point in the country's migration history. When refugees arrived at train stations, many Germans showed spontaneous signs of solidarity, while a large majority of the population said they believed in the obligation of countries (including Germany) to accept refugees (Mosel & Smart, 2019). No doubt the federal government played a fundamental role in conveying a message of tolerance and spreading the 'welcoming culture' before and during the so-called 'refugee crisis'. Yet the cabinet's position changed later, something that did not prevent further politicisation of the issue. What was then responsible for the issue's high politicisation in Germany?

Experts in politicisation processes (De Wilde, 2011) have downplayed the importance of socio-economic variables like the number of immigrants or rising unemployment (Grande *et al*., 2019) and emphasised the relevance of political parties, both mainstream and radical. In Germany too, the radical right heavily contributed to the politicisation of the issue in a twofold way:

(1) The heightening of the debate on the 'refugee crisis' clearly facilitated the political success of the new Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the Federal elections of 2017. Until then, the history of far-right parties in Germany had been one of bitter internal division, marginalisation and political irrelevance. The allegedly different 'waves' of right-wing extremism since the end of the Second World War had failed to produce an enduring alternative party to the right of the *Union*, least of all one that was *salonfähig*.[1] Founded in 2013 by some radicals, ex-CDU and FDP leaders and other members of a moderate profile who advocated Germany's exit from the euro, AfD's initial focus on economic issues and socially conservative policies prevented its outright classification as a radical right-wing, or extremist right-wing, party (Arzheimer, 2015). Although the party had failed to gain representation at the Federal election in 2013, its near-success (garnering 4.7% of the vote) boosted its breakthrough: the impressive results at the European elections in 2014 marked a milestone in the party's trajectory and strengthened its anti-European stances. However, this meteoric growth also triggered internal strife: the neo-liberal, moderate wing left the party, which paved the way for internal ideological reorientation under the more radical leadership of Frauke Petry.

(2) However, anti-immigrant mobilisation was first led, not by AfD, but by the PEGIDA movement ('Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident'), which entered the scene in the autumn of 2014 in Saxony and called weekly demonstrations against (religious) radicalisation on 'German soil'. The increasing appeal of the movement forced Chancellor Merkel early in 2015 to advance the principles on which the government's policy would soon be based, which explicitly rejected xenophobia, racism and extremism. Through use of social media, PEGIDA was able to gather tens of thousands of demonstrators concerned about Islamisation, of a more middle-class profile than the typical NPD members and neo-Nazi skinheads of past decades. When PEGIDA gained momentum again in the autumn of 2015, the new leadership of AfD was ready to explore common ground: both party and movement were sometimes seen as 'two sides of the same coin' (Grabow, 2016).

All in all, Merkel's temporary suspension of the Dublin regulations allowed the German far-right to capitalise on public discontent. The ideological turn to the right of AfD, together with the increased salience of the refugee issue for Germans in general and radical right-wing voters in particular, were deemed responsible for its success in entering the Bundestag at the 2017 general election. This coexisted with episodes of social far-right mobilisation and altered the traditional internal dynamics within the German far-right milieu.[2]

[1] 'Socially acceptable'.
[2] When extreme right alternatives failed at the polls there used to be outbursts of racist, violent mobilisation on the streets coming from the very active skinhead and sub-cultural extremist groups (Koopmans, 1996; Koopmans & Kriesi, 1997).

But tensions arising from the increased visibility of the extreme right were not the only ones: the open arms policy of Merkel's cabinet soon came under internal attack as well, exacerbating divisions within the governmental coalition, which adopted more restrictive solidarity policies,[3] pushed the EU-Turkey deal and gradually replaced concepts like 'solidarity' or 'humanitarian engagement', with 'strangeness', 'security threat' or 'deservingness of individuals regarding their causes of flight' (Beinhorn & Glorius, 2018, p. 45). Moreover, the decrease in arrivals since March 2016 was linked to the closure of the Balkan route rather than to effective crisis management, thus reinforcing the anti-refugee front's arguments.

To make things worse, violent protests against refugees in the streets also peaked in 2016, echoing the sequence of events which took place in the early 90s, again in the context of the asylum issue. Counter-mobilisations followed, and polarisation around the divisive issue continued to increase[4] until the 2017 Bundestag elections, which marked the highest level of politicisation since the 1990s, and signalled the beginning of a new phase in the dynamics of party competition in German politics.

Denmark: the amplification of populist politicisation

At the peak of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in autumn 2015, Denmark was among the most inhospitable countries in the EU. The welcoming culture that was sparked in neighbouring Sweden and Germany in the initial weeks of August and September 2015 did not extend to Denmark. Rather, the Danish government insisted on the strict application of the Dublin Regulation, rejecting the asylum applications of refugees who entered via its southern borders with Germany.

Denmark has a long tradition of immigration deterrence policies that distinguishes it from its northern partner Sweden (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017). After the general elections of June 2015, a new centre-right minority government was formed with the support of the right-populist Danish People's Party. The latter could exert considerable influence on the programme of the new government formed by Lars Løkke Rasmussen. Among the conditions it set for its support in Parliament were a Eurosceptic approach, the re-introduction of border controls and further restrictions on immigration and asylum policies.

The refugee crisis of late summer/early autumn 2015 was a first opportunity for the new government to test out its restrictive approach. By early September 2015 the Danish government had placed advertisements in Lebanese newspapers, warning refugees that they would encounter harsh measures, including detention and deportation, if they decided to come to Denmark. In December 2015 the so-called 'jewellery law' was announced, which allowed for the seizure of assets from refugees upon arrival in

[3] See the Position paper from the CDU and CSU signed in November 2015. See also the contents of the coalition agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD for the 19th Legislature.
[4] There is, however, some evidence that attitudes towards refugees and migrants may not have shifted too much since 2015, or even may be more pro-refugee. See Mosel & Smart (2019). Beinhorn & Glorius (2018, p. 31) also show that 'in 2017, 87% of German respondents see a national obligation to help refugees, compared with 65% in 2015'.

Denmark. These harsh measures caused an international outcry but were also contested within Denmark.

Nevertheless, Denmark experienced a considerable increase in asylum applications in 2015, accepting a total of 21,000 refugees, which ranks it 10th among EU countries with the highest intake of refugees per capita of the population (though seven times less than neighbouring Sweden and two to three times less than Germany).

The Danish government's harsh approach to the European crisis was, de facto, not a rupture of existing practices, as also previous governments (including the Social Democratic led coalition government between 2011 and 2015) followed a restrictive approach and used a hostile rhetoric towards migrant minorities. Politicisation was driven by the Danish People's Party who owned the issue and turned it into one of their trademarks. Mainstream parties instead of taking distance or opting for counter-mobilisation rather competed with the Danish People's Party for ownership by adapting a similar exclusive rhetoric towards refugees. Overall, this reflects the consensual style of Danish partisan politics where sharp confrontations or polarisation is avoided by all parties. Politicisation of the refugee issue also must be understood beyond the background of the country's opt-out position in the EU and was partially directed against other member states (especially Germany) who demanded more solidarity and support within the framework of European collaboration.

It is noteworthy, however, that the politicisation strategy of the Danish government driven by the right-wing populists did not result in a more hostile public opinion. According to a representative opinion poll measuring public attitudes of solidarity towards refugees, Denmark was not found to be particularly hostile compared to other European countries (Trenz & Grasso, 2018). A substantial part of the population rather expressed embarrassment of their government's lack of solidarity towards refugees. During September and October 2015, tens of thousands of people took part in pro-refugee rallies in all the major cities of Denmark and civil society all over the country mobilised support for incoming refugees. Politicisation of the refugee and asylum issue was thus responded by civil society solidarity mobilisation, which partially replaced the absence of partisan opposition.

However, the substantial minority of Danes favouring more liberal asylum policies stands in opposition to the large majority of those supporting the restrictive governmental policies of autumn 2015. There is thus only little evidence for an increasing polarisation of Danish society on questions regarding immigration, multiculturalism and international human rights obligations (Trenz & Grasso, 2018). The right-communitarian pole is mainstream. It is represented by the Danish People's Party (at that time Denmark's second-largest party, having gained 21.1% of the vote in the 2015 general elections. Mainstream political parties of both the left and the right do not fundamentally oppose this ethno-cultural-exclusive approach. The left-cosmopolitan pole, instead, is represented by the Red-Green Alliance (*Enhedslisten*), garnering 7.8% of the vote in the 2015 elections, but also by many civil society initiatives appealing to the moral obligations of inclusive, humanitarian solidarity, globally.

By looking at the chronology of the debate in the Danish media, the hard-line approach to refugees has been upheld by the government since 2015 and was also confirmed by the new Social-Democratic coalition government, which took office in 2019. Denmark is thus the case of consensual politicisation of the refugee issue within the political party landscape, with opposition confined to civil society and parties at the extreme left margin. There is, in other words, only a weak manifestation of a new communitarian-cosmopolitan cleavage but, rather, a continuation of the tradition of consensual politics leaning towards exclusive-communitarian solutions regarding immigration and asylum policies.

Spain: the wandering politicisation of refugees and party system change

The politicisation of refugees in Spain took place under two very different political scenarios. The first period, from 2015 to 2018, responds to Mariano Rajoy's Popular Party (PP) in the national government and its restrictive policy. During this period the PP government formally complied with the quotas established by the EU despite Rajoy being reluctant to receive refugees, even those allotted to the country by European quotas. In contrast, the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the far-left IU and Podemos took a position that was pro-refugee and campaigned, together with trade unions and civil society organisations, for the rights and inclusion of refugees. A second period starting in 2018 opened with the formation of a Socialist government after a vote of no confidence. The Socialist leader Pedro Sánchez called elections twice in 2019, in June and November, given the impossibility of forming a government. After the November 2019 elections a new coalition government between the PSOE and Podemos was formed.

The politicisation of refugees in the Spanish party system clearly preceded the emergence of VOX, allegedly a party of the populist radical-right family in Europe (Ferreira, 2019). VOX, created in 2013 and competing in the 2014 European elections for the first time with marginal results, did not achieve representation at the local, national or European levels until 2018. However, it steadily increased at the national level in the June and November 2019 general elections. The party entered the Andalusian parliament and granted external support to the newly-born Andalusian right-wing coalition government formed by the PP and Ciudadanos (Cs) in 2018. VOX's programme did not specifically mention refugees, but it denounced the presence of illegal migrants in Spain.[5]

The year 2015 was also a critical juncture in Spanish politics, with a breakdown in the traditional Spanish two-party system. The main parties previously shared over 70% of the vote while in 2015 the vote share for the two main parties was drastically reduced to 50.73%. Podemos captured by far most international attention as a left-populist or libertarian populist. Cs, first involved in Catalan issues, moved to 'national' politics with a liberal agenda. Podemos took a clear position to support refugees since the beginning of the 2015 crisis and it joined the efforts of civil-society organisations. Podemos' programme for the 2015 and 2016 general elections supported the defence of refugees

[5] VOX voters are the least prone to solidarity with refugees. The same survey also shows that the main concern of VOX voters is Spanish unity (Hugo Marcos Marne, USAL-University of St Gallen, unpublished dataset, 2019).

within the larger claim to defend migrants' rights and inclusion. The Popular party, in government in 2015, reacted negatively to European pressures but the issue of refugees had acquired by then an increasing visibility in the Spanish media. By September 2015 Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy had agreed to accept some refugees in the country, an initial quota of 5,000. In addition, in 2016 he supported negotiations between the EU and Turkey to control refugee flows. All the Spanish parliamentary groups rejected the agreement as illegal. That was the height of polarisation on refugees during the first period of the PP's conservative policies. While Rajoy did not openly contest the quotas assigned to Spain in 2015, he did not comply with them either. In 2019 the Spanish government was condemned by the Supreme Court to proceed with the pending applications for asylum from Italy and Greece because it had only covered 12.85% of the quota assigned.

Thus, politicisation of the issue in Spain did not enter via populist radical parties. From 2015 the politicisation of refugees entered party competition with the opposition of the Socialist Party, United Left and Podemos as allies. Spanish public opinion was rather favourable towards refugees (CIS, 2018). Although its engagement was limited, civil society organisations also participated in the Spanish refugee movement: CEAR, Acoge, etc. The Spanish branch of the NGO 'Refugees Welcome', created in Berlin, was also active across Spanish territory. One of the complaints of Spanish civil-society organisations was the lack of distinctiveness of refugees, as opposed to migrants, in political discourse and public debate.

After the 2015 local elections, both Madrid and Barcelona were governed by left-wing progressive alliances which denounced the lack of response of the Rajoy government to the refugee crisis. Local alliances between the progressive left and pro-refugee movements characterised the politicisation of the issue in the cities of Madrid and Barcelona. On 8 September 2015, a banner with 'Refugees Welcome' was hanged on the façade of Madrid's town hall (until the PP removed it in June 2019 after its electoral victory in the local elections).

In 2018 Pedro Sánchez's new government aimed at a clear-cut departure from Rajoy's conservative stand on refugees. In turn, partisan polarisation on the issue of refugees was reinforced by the electoral success of VOX in 2018 and 2019. VOX campaigned not only against refugees but also induced further radicalisation of the PP on the issue, followed also by Ciudadanos.

Conclusions

Taking 2015 as a critical juncture, this paper has analysed different trajectories of the politicisation of refugees in the EU. It has discussed Germany as a case of solidarity mobilisation driven by the Merkel government, and mainstream parties and civil society aligned against a new populist radical-right party, AfD. In contrast, it has shown that Denmark is a case of low issue politicisation of refugees, explained by the established nature of the DPP as a consolidated actor in Danish politics and an external supporter of the government. Here restriction policies against refugees were consensual among most parties. Finally, Spain is a case of politicisation of refugees without a populist radical-right party. Today political polarisation between a pro-refugee left pole and a

restrictive right-wing pole, including VOX, represent the configuration of conflict in the Spanish party system.

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